

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 2

BOSTON GLOBE
25 FEBRUARY 1983

Private team reportedly in Laos seeking proof POWs still alive

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Former Green Beret Lt. Col. James (Bo) Gritz and his attempts to find US prisoners in Laos are becoming a source of increasing diplomatic embarrassment to Washington. Gritz and a team of three Americans are reportedly now in Laos, illegally, on his third private mission to rescue American servicemen who Gritz' backers believe are still being held prisoner from the Vietnam War.

Gritz - a highly decorated Vietnam War hero from



Los Angeles who has been doggedly organizing private POW rescue and intelligence-gathering efforts since 1979 - and two other Americans: David Scott Weekly, 35, of Encinitas, Calif., and Gary Goldman, 38, of Encino, Calif., are in Laos on a mission to rescue a

POW, or at least bring back conclusive evidence that even one prisoner is still alive, according to two persons involved in the operation.

Meanwhile, two other Americans providing communications support for Gritz in Thailand along its border with Laos - Lance Trimmer, 43, of Sonoma, Calif., and Lynn Standerwick, 26, of Sherman Oaks, Calif. - were arrested last week and charged with possession of an unlicensed radio transmitter. Thai police are said to be patrolling the Laotian border waiting to arrest the Gritz team should it resurface in Thailand.

The Los Angeles Times reported Monday that its bureau in Bangkok had received a letter from the 44-year-old Gritz, purportedly "deep in the Laotian jungle," in which he said he had come up with "some POW ID" but could not confirm its authenticity. He vowed to press on until he knows definitively whether Americans are still being held captive or not.

2494 Americans unaccounted for

At issue are the 2494 Americans who remain unaccounted for in Southeast Asia since the end of the war. The United States has declared all but two of them dead. But a Pentagon spokesman, Maj. Robert Shields, said that there have been 480 reports of firsthand sightings of live American POWs since the fall of Saigon in 1975, and the government "can't rule out the possibility there are Americans still over there."

Participants in the current mission said financing came from private donations - including \$30,000 from actor Clint Eastwood and another \$10,000 from actor William Shatner. Litton Industries, a major defense contractor, provided Gritz with \$50,000. He, in turn, gave that money back to Litton in a complicated transaction, in which the company agreed to supply him with about \$750,000 worth of its state-of-the-art communications gear, as well as night-vision devices and other equipment. A spokesman for Litton said it provided the equipment "as a patriotic gesture."

There has also been a suggestion that President Ronald Reagan knew of or supported the Gritz operation. Charles Patterson, 37, of Duniba, Calif., a former Gritz operative who participated in an earlier phase of a current mission but left to sell his story to Soldier of Fortune magazine, has told the publication Reagan was informed of the Gritz effort and gave it his tacit blessing at a meeting set up by Eastwood at the President's California ranch.

The White House at the time said it had no knowledge of such a meeting and reiterated the government's position against private rescue missions. (The Los Angeles Times reported today that Reagan asked his national security advisers about Gritz and was told that he was "not somebody we ought to be involved with." The President agreed, Administration officials told the Times.)

Three other key players in the Gritz (pronounced Grighs) mission are from the Boston area. They are: Vincent Arnone, a private investigator and security guard from Malden, who according to sources familiar with the operation, made one incursion into Laos himself late last year; Donald Van Roosen, a Harvard-educated high-technology executive and former Green Beret from Wellesley; and Albert Mundo, an airline pilot from Marblehead. Van Roosen says he contributed \$5000 to the Gritz effort and helped solicit other funds, while Mundo raised money and has sought to arrange passage home for the Gritz team if they bring out a live prisoner.